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Wrong Man For The CIA

Had President Nixon wanted to choose a new CIA director who could restore national confidence in the agency, control its covert operations, end its domestic involvements and strengthen its intelligence work, Mr. Nixon hardly could have found a nominee with a worse background than William E. Colby.

Mr. Colby is presently head of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, which means clandestine operations. The Senate Armed Services Committee already has heard that his intelligence career has been devoted far less to intelligence collection than to covert activities.

In 1962 he became chief of the Far East Division of the CIA's covert operations. In 1968, he headed the "pacification" program in Vietnam. Later he supervised the Phoenix program, which attempted to eliminate Viet Cong influences. A House subcommittee heard in 1971 that the Phoenix program had killed more than 20,000 persons. Even if Phoenix is not discredited on moral grounds, it should be conceded that it did not work. Officials are not normally promoted for failures.

Indeed, the record of the CIA's clandestine

efforts, or dirty tricks, is not notable for successes: the Bay of Pigs, the U-2 incident, secret war in Laos and, at home, the infiltration of student and labor and political groups, the embarrassing subsidization of foundations, and the supporting role in the Ellsberg burglary that helped blow up the case.

The CIA needs to be brought back to its originally understood purpose of foreign intelligence gathering and collation. Dirty tricks can only distort this function, and there can be no room for dirty tricks against the American people. Presumably to this end Senator Stennis has ordered an Armed Services Committee review of the laws governing the CIA.

Still, the committee's hearings under Senator Symington as acting chairman indicate that Mr. Colby is not the man to restore the CIA to its purpose. Mr. Symington describes the nominee as an honest, dedicated American, but Mr. Colby has served the concept that dirty tricks can be a patriotic exercise because other nations practice them. That concept should be disavowed, along with the nomination of William Colby.